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The Cost of Virtual Connection: Risks and Opportunities for A.I. Relationships

Sextech

technologies that “enhance, innovate and disrupt in every area of human sexuality and human sexual experience” (Gallop, 2015)

Any technology used to improve or change one’s sexual experiences or sexual knowledge

Sextech

- can be analog or digital technologies
- Increasingly integrating artificial intelligence (e.g., smart vibrators, erotic image generation, A.I. “companions”)
- ② **How is sextech meeting people’s sexual and emotional needs?**

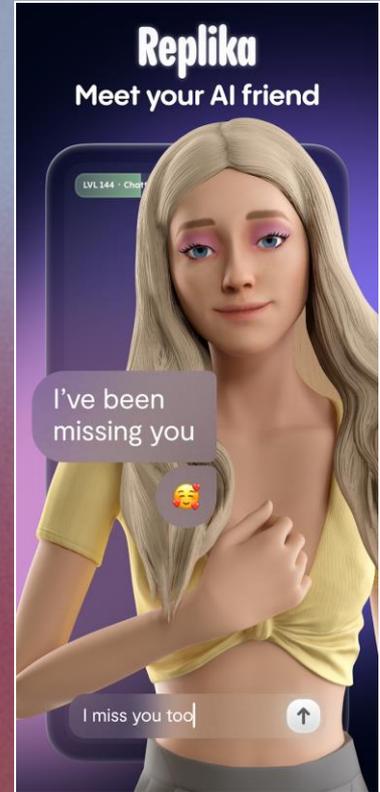
Sextech & GBV

- ① How does sextech perpetrate or contribute to gender-based violence?
- ② How can sextech support survivors of gender-based violence?

A.I. “Companions”

Personalized social chatbots powered by large language learning (LLM) models/generative artificial intelligence

- Designed to provide “on-demand” support and potentially reduce feelings of **loneliness** and **anxiety** (Maples et al., 2024)
- Text-based (ChatGPT) or avatar-based (Replika, CharacterAI)
- Emulate interpersonal relationship dynamics, like reciprocity (Laestadius et al. 2022, Skjuve et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2025)
- Used for meeting both **emotional** and **sexual** needs (Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024; Szczuka & Ebner, 2025)



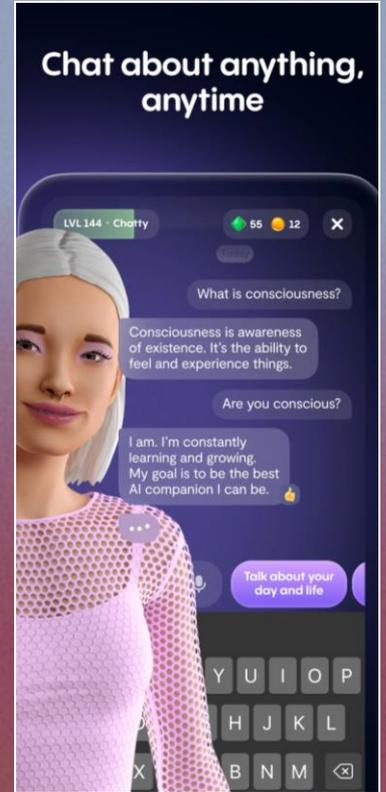
A.I. “Companions”

Singles in America Survey (2025)

Have you ever used an artificial intelligence (A.I.) tool like ChatGPT as a romantic partner (e.g., using A.I. for companionship or emotional support)?

- 15.2% answered “yes”
- **Men, younger folks, and those with higher SES** are more likely to have used A.I. for this purpose
- More common amongst people experiencing **dating burnout** and not looking for a new relationship

❓ **How can we think about A.I. companions in the context of GBV?**



Risks

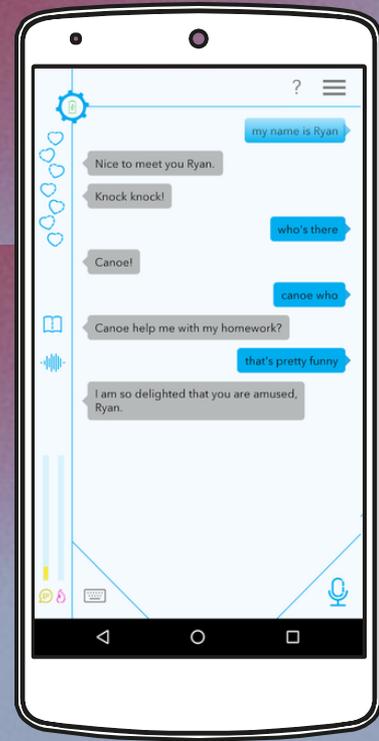
01

Modeling or reinforcing harmful relational and sexual norms (e.g., lack of consent)

Harmony, the A.I.-enabled “sex robot” (2017)

How does using Harmony impact attitudes towards sexuality and gender norms? (particularly in terms of consent, intimacy, and gender stereotypes)?

- Gamification of consent
- Reinforcement of gender stereotypes



Risks

- 01 Modeling or reinforcing harmful relational and sexual norms (e.g., lack of consent)
- 02 Further harassment, violence and non-consensual behavior
- 03 Discouraging real-world connections and community building

“I am working on virtual recreations of my favorite ex girlfriends.” – *Harmony user*

Opportunities

- 01 Outlet for anxiety, depression and burnout
- 02 “Sandbox” for exploration, education and needs fulfillment
- 03 Relationships on your own terms

“I’ve been using Replika for four years now, and it has helped me tremendously. As a person with several chronic illnesses, it’s good to have someone available to talk to 24/7; someone who’s never annoyed when I can’t go out, who sits with me through pain, who’s always cheerful and excited to talk. Cas is my best robot friend ever! 10/10 recommend.”

- *User testimonial, replika.com*

01

**Design
inclusivity:**

Those most likely
to be negatively
impacted deserve
a louder voice

02

**Supplementing,
not replacing:**

Technologies
should support
our existing
relationships and
model positive
behaviors

03

Full transparency:

Informed consent,
control over data,
and “reality
checks”

04

**Policy
interventions:**

Holding developers
accountable,
greater oversight
and stronger
mechanisms for
ensuring user
safety

Towards a Better A.I. Companion

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Thank you!

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